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Freshwater Mussel Shells: A Status Symbol at the Roitsch/Williams Sites in Red River County, Texas?

Jesse Todd

Upon examining unmodified bone and shell from the Sanders site (41LR2), the Dan Holdeman site (41RR11), the Roitsch site (41RR16), the Bob Williams portion of the Roitsch site (41RR16), the Rowland Clark site (41RR77), and the Roden site (34Mc215), which are located in the Middle Red River Valley of Texas and Oklahoma, freshwater mussel shells were more apparent as burial furniture at the Roitsch and Bob Williams site than any other of the above mentioned sites.

Freshwater mussel shells were recorded by Perttula et al. (2001:189-190) from five McCurtain phase burials at the Roitsch site. One of the graves was a multiple interment. Only one grave contained a mussel shell in the excavations conducted by Skinner et al. (1969:34), but the grave was a shaft burial that also belongs to the McCurtain phase. The presence of the freshwater mussel shell in the shaft burial indicates that it was placed with a person of status.

Interestingly, out of a total of 36 described burials at the Roitsch site (Skinner et al. 1969; Perttula et al. 2001), six (17%) contained freshwater mussel shells. At the Bob Williams part of the Roitsch site (Perino 1983), four of the 73 burials (5.5%) contained freshwater mussel shells. At the Roden site, which is across the river from the Roitsch and Williams sites, only one burial (2.6%) out of 38 burials contained two large freshwater mussel shells (Perino 1981:47). No freshwater mussel shells were recorded as burial furniture at the Sanders site (Jackson et al. 2000), the Dan Holdeman site (Perino 1995), or the Rowland Clark site (Perino 1994).

According to Parmalee and Bogan (1981) and Parmalee and Opperman (1983), a variety of freshwater mussel species were present in the Red River valley during the Middle Caddo and McCurtain phase times (ca. A.D. 1200-1700). But they were only used during those time periods as grave furniture at the Roitsch and Williams sites.

At Roitsch and Bob Williams, the freshwater mussel shells were placed in both male and female burials as well as with subadults (Loveland and Bass 1983; Loveland 1994; Derrick et al. 2008). The age ranges are from approximately seven to eight years of age to about 40 years old.

In conclusion, unmodified freshwater mussel shells may have been a status item at the Roitsch/Williams sites because they appear to have been used as burial furniture at only those sites, with one exception at the Roden site. Freshwater mussel shells apparently were available, but shells are not present as burial furniture in any of the other archaeological sites in the area.

The origin of the freshwater mussel is explained by the Pawnee, used in religious and ritual performances by the Osage, and as medicine by the Cherokee (Todd 2006); therefore, the freshwater mussel is an important artifact to other Native American nations. Consequently, the freshwater mussel shell may have held a significance only for the Caddo residents of the Roitsch/Williams sites since the presence of freshwater mussel shells in burials does not appear to be a widespread Caddo phenomenon.

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